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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1709

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001832

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI HOLDING FIRM, KEEPING "PLAN B" IN RESERVE

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Majority leader Saad Hariri remains firm in his opposition to Michel Edde as president. Acknowledging that March 14 risked being blamed for blocking consensus, Hariri refuses to let the minority (with Syrian support) dictate Lebanon's next president to the majority. Having already conceded much of its power by agreeing to the French initiative (sans safety net), March 14 is now furious with French efforts to pressure it to accept an Edde presidency and do what it sees as Syria's bidding. Hariri alluded to a "plan B" up his sleeve; we wonder if it has something to do with ongoing discussions between his Future Movement and Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement following the two leaders' impromptu meeting late on November 21. End summary.

AOUN WON'T SUPPORT MICHEL EDDE

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¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with majority leader Saad Hariri and his advisor Ghattas Khoury on November 22 immediately following a stormy meeting with Speaker Nabih Berri (septel). Hariri, who had met the night before with Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun, denied that Aoun would support Michel Edde (as Berri claims), saying Aoun's position continued to be himself or nobody. Hariri said Aoun had agreed to withdraw his candidacy if he could get some sort of "guarantees" in return, and that Aoun "blasted Michel Edde out of the water."

FURIOUS WITH THE FRENCH

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¶3. (C) The French don't care who is president, Hariri said, they just want a victory. Referring to French Special Envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran's recent visit and the current visits of French FM Kouchner and Spanish FM Moratinos (Italian FM D'Alema had not yet arrived), Hariri said they were all "pushing to the end" to make March 14 accept Michel Edde, essentially shelving the majority by asking it to accept the minority's demands. And if I don't, Saad said, the Elysee

will call me and ask me to vote for someone I don't want to. I'll refuse, and I'll be the bad guy, but I'll take that responsibility. No one can pressure me, he said.

¶4. (C) Saad admitted that French President Sarkozy, in his phone call the previous evening, had not tried to pressure him (although Khoury noted that other French officials were pressuring March 14 MPs). Saad reportedly warned Sarkozy that an 18 month Edde presidency would signal the destruction of the Christians. Furthermore, an interim presidency was not the answer every time Lebanon faced a political crisis.

¶5. (C) Khoury said the French initiative had accomplished three things: 1) it had reinstalled Syrian President Bashar Asad as the first player in Lebanon's presidential elections; 2) it had nearly destroyed March 14; and 3) it had strengthened the role of Michel Aoun. The Syrians are appointing the president, he said; all consensus means for Berri is that Hizballah is on board. And in the process, the Ambassador noted, the democratic concepts of majority and minority have become irrelevant.

MARCH 14 IS NOT THE PROBLEM

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¶6. (C) Acknowledging that March 14 risked being blamed if no president is elected by midnight November 23, Hariri said he had told Cousseran that March 14 had taken courageous steps in accepting the French initiative to let the Patriarch draw up a list. It had agreed to go forward even though Berri refused to provide a safety net assuring that, if no consensus was reached, parliament would be allowed to vote on the names directly. However, in a normal democracy the majority should not have to give in to the demands of the minority, Saad stressed.

¶7. (C) Saad confirmed he would be willing to go let

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parliament vote on the two "consensus" candidates on the list, Robert Ghanem and Michel Edde (both of which are rejected by his Lebanese Forces ally Samir Geagea.) March 8, however, after blocking five of the seven candidates on the Patriarch's list, now is insisting on one name only. (Note: Saad called Berri during the meeting, proposing that Berri convene parliament to vote on the two names; Berri refused. End note.)

¶8. (C) Saad did not (unlike Berri, septel) blame Aoun for the current situation, claiming Aoun's members already were divided. Instead, the fault lies with the Syrians, who obviously don't want elections, and who lied to the French. Amal and Hizballah only need the "password" and they will take action, he said, but they haven't received it yet. He also alluded to an unhelpful role that the Qataris were playing with the Syrians. The French must understand that it is not March 14 that is blocking consensus, he stressed, and they must stop pushing a candidate who is unacceptable to us.

HARIRI HAS PLAN B

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¶9. (C) Saad said that over dinner with Jumblatt the previous evening, he had asked Jumblatt (who reportedly was ready to vote for any candidate just to avoid a crisis) what he feared. If the opposition wants civil war, Hariri told the Ambassador, let them have it. I have a plan B -- I will pull a rabbit out of the hat, and it will be a big one, he proclaimed, though he refused to provide further detail. The feeling in Lebanon is that the international community has given up on us.

¶10. (C) Khoury echoed Hariri's statements separately, saying that in the past three weeks the sense was that the U.S. had stopped supporting March 14. We need to go back to before

the French initiative, he said, and step up the pressure.

COMMENT

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¶11. (C) We can only guess at to what Hariri means by "plan B," but the recent scurry of meetings between his party and Michel Aoun's makes us wonder whether a plan to bypass March 8 is in the works. Such a deal has merits: the leaders of the majority and minority come together to choose a president, at the same time forging a new Christian-Muslim alliance. And Hizballah is left out in the cold.

FELTMAN